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Pushing interpretive scholarship further by embracing comparative research

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Book reviewed:

The Art and Craft of Comparison

John Boswell, Jack Corbett and R.A.W. Rhodes (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019), 167 pp. ISBN: 978-1-108-47285-2

Interpretive approaches to the study of social sciences focus on the actions and practices of actors as explained through the beliefs, desires and ideas of the people involved. John Boswell, Jack Corbett and R.A.W. Rhodes are established scholars that each have wide-ranging experience of applying interpretive scholarship. There is much to learn from them, and it is precisely this that *The Art and Craft of Comparison* offers. The book is refreshingly honest, pragmatic and easy-to-follow, explaining how scholars within the broad interpretive tradition can adapt their research for comparative social science – which has remained a somewhat elusive goal for many because of the way that interpretive research has traditionally privileged depth and nuance over generalisable or comparative claims. The book makes both a theoretical contribution in explaining why we should adopt an interpretive lens in comparative research and a pragmatic contribution by explaining how this can be done. These two points are the focus of this review.

In *Art and Craft*, the main theoretical basis for comparative interpretivism is centred around the concept of ‘dilemmas’. For the authors, dilemmas arise for individuals when a new idea stands in contrast to existing beliefs, or when actors face contrasting choices about their everyday practices. It is through dilemmas that political change occurs and, most importantly for the purposes of the book, that we can conduct comparative analyses of social phenomena. In doing so, the authors argue, it is possible to overcome the limitations of interpretive research that have been identified by naturalists (or positivists) and humanists.

The philosophical foundation that Boswell et al. provide is really interesting in two ways. First, it provides a distinctive way through which we can compare social phenomena. They are provocative, suggesting that, for example, their approach allows for comparison between French presidential politics and village-level politics in rural India. Traditional comparative researchers may baulk at the prospect, but the authors provide a plausible argument that there are dilemmas around leadership, loyalty, dealing with crises, etc. that are common to both. The authors convincingly urge us to think creatively and not be bound by traditionally naturalist assumptions around comparison. Second, the authors’ development of ‘dilemmas’

pushes forward the theoretical literature – something which is much needed (Hay, 2011; Geddes, 2019). It is a critical foundation of the book and the authors make a good argument about its role both in social phenomena and as analytical focus. The authors leave open questions around links to other interpretive concepts, the interaction between different types of dilemma, or how to distinguish dilemmas from simply making social and political choices. This suggests that further analytical precision is possible, but we must remember that the primary aim of this book is to be pragmatic. What the authors therefore do is provide a good foundation for what I hope will be more refinement in future.

Having identified the conceptual framework and basis for their approach, the remainder of the book (chapters 4-7) turns its attention to the pragmatic choices that interpretive scholars face in doing their research. The chapters are organised thematically on designing the research, undertaking fieldwork, carrying out analysis and suggestions for writing up findings. A continuing theme of the book is that doing research is messy and scholars should embrace the creativity and opportunities that this may bring.

What easily comes through from start to finish is the sheer wealth of experience of the authors. They accept that mistakes happen, that we each face individual challenges in doing research, and that it is impossible to offer a perfectly designed and perfectly executed project. Instead, the authors offer ‘rules of thumb’ – broad lessons that they have learned and ideas that they wish to impart. This is practical, from keeping a fieldwork diary to organising writing workshops, as well as the principles on which comparative researchers should make their decisions. While I would have liked further engagement with methodological debates in the literature, this doesn’t take away from the extremely useful suggestions they make. The authors draw extensively on personal experience, whether it is feedback they have received from colleagues or ethical dilemmas they had to adjudicate during fieldwork. This means the book has depth and nuance; it is not another abstract book on how to design comparative research. We are given a reflexive account that presents comparative research as a human endeavour. This makes it all the more convincing and useful.

Overall, the book is an ideal match for anyone thinking of undertaking interpretive research (comparative or not). Indeed, the book would be great to keep in your pocket (if it’s big enough) as you carry out interpretive research, too.

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Hay, C. (2011) ‘Interpreting Interpretivism Interpreting Interpretations: The New Hermeneutics of Public Administration’, *Public Administration* 89(1): 167-82.

About the Author

Dr Marc Geddes is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Edinburgh. He adopts an interpretive approach to study parliamentary politics and recently published *Dramas at Westminster: Select committees and the quest for accountability*.